

Lucretius the Epicurean poet

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At the end of the fourth century B.C. in Athens, a group of philosophers assembled in a private garden outside the main area of the city. They came together as followers of Epicurus, an Athenian born on the island of Samos, who promised to be able to teach them all they needed to know about the world in order to live a happy life. The place, and the philosophical school within it, came to be known as 'The Garden.' Here these philosophers came to talk, to learn, and to revere Epicurus – the founder of their movement and (in their eyes at least) the saviour of mankind from all manner of foolish and destructive views about the world.

Some four hundred years later a Roman aristocrat called Lucretius decided to compose a mammoth work in hexameter verse extolling the benefits of Epicureanism and commending its teaching to the Roman public. We know next to nothing about him, beyond his name. We can certainly see his influence, however, both on near-contemporaries such as Virgil, and on later literature and philosophy. His poem is one of the best sources we have for the thought of the Epicureans of the Athenian Garden, since most of Epicurus' own works – the works that Lucretius would have read and used – are now lost.

Poetic licence

Why did Lucretius choose the form of poetry to expound philosophical ideas? Surely, we might think, there is a risk of contradiction here: poetry engages the emotions, happily dealing in metaphor, allusion, and imagery; whereas philosophy is a rational enterprise, aiming to exhibit bare and clear truths. At any rate, that is the impression of philosophy we might take from what tends to go by that name at present, and there are ancient precedents for this conception of philosophy as the practice of reason. Anyone familiar with philosophical treatises or articles in scholarly journals, therefore, might find the idea of a philosophical poem distinctly odd. Stranger still, in using poetry Lucretius seems to be going against the recommendations of his own Epicurean mentors. What little we have of Epicurus' own writing and of technical writings by other Epicurean philosophers is all in prose.

Nevertheless, there are at least three reasons why it makes good sense for Lucretius to have written in this way. Firstly, in choosing this medium to promote the Epicurean view of the world, Lucretius is invoking a long-standing tradition of philosophical poetry. So far as we can tell, some of the very earliest Greek philosophers composed poetic works. Ancient readers and writers were quite used to getting their philosophy in poetic form. One philosopher in particular, Empedocles, seems to have been an important model so far as the form of the poem is concerned, since Lucretius borrows and transforms a number of his phrases (even though he includes in book one a strong attack on the content of Empedocles' philosophy). Empedocles too wrote a poem designed to offer a comprehensive account of the world, and he titled it accordingly: *On Nature*. Lucretius recalls this (and other similarly entitled works) by naming his poem *On the Nature of Things*.

Secondly, it matters that Lucretius is trying to *teach* his readers. There was a deeply established tradition of 'teaching' (or 'didactic') poetry, stretching back to Hesiod in the eighth century B.C. Virgil wrote a poem in this genre, the *Georgics*,

which deals with agriculture and the natural world. It is interesting to note that he refers prominently to Lucretius and his poem in the second book. For Virgil, then, Lucretius' poem belongs squarely within the tradition of didactic poetry.

Thirdly, and perhaps most importantly, Lucretius is aware that some of the more technical aspects of his philosophical message may be hard-going or difficult to comprehend. In that case, he says, the poetic form of the work can act as a sweetener to help the transmission of the required knowledge. This is how he puts the point in the fourth book (there is a similar passage in the first book):

For just as doctors who are trying to give children bitter drugs first touch the edge of the cups with the sweet, yellow, liquid honey, so that the naïve youngsters might be beguiled (at least as far as the lips) and then drink deeply the bitter juice of the drug – and although deceived they are not betrayed, but rather by such a ruse they might regain their health and grow stronger – so I now, since this philosophy seems to the many who have never studied it to be a little harsh, and is shuddered at by the common crowd, wanted to explain my thinking to you in a sweet-voiced song.

In this passage, Lucretius explains his choice of poetry as a medium through analogy. Poetic form is like the honey on a cup which makes the 'bitter drug' (philosophy) palatable. We enjoy the taste of the poetry, and meanwhile drink in the philosophy, which we would otherwise find distasteful. But this analogy leaves him open to criticisms. Does this not sound as though he is fooling his readers? To an extent, Lucretius claims, but though 'deceived,' his readers will be 'not betrayed, but rather by such a ruse they might regain their health and grow stronger.' We *need* to be deceived in this case because, like children being treated for some illness, we do not realise fully just how much good this philosophy will do. Until we become Epicureans, we cannot know what we are missing.

But there is a second possible criticism that could be levelled against Lucretius here. We might begin to wonder if the poet is implicitly agreeing that Epicureanism tastes horrible. But again, we must remember that although the drug is bitter in the short term, it is beneficial in the long run. From Lucretius' perspective – which we will share if we become Epicureans ourselves – there is nothing sweeter than Epicurean philosophy. In this way, therefore, the analogy that Lucretius uses breaks down. Although the doctor, unlike the patient, realises that the drug is good, it still tastes bad even to him. But once we become Epicureans ourselves, what was a bitter and unpleasant experience becomes sweet and pleasant – just like the honey.

Doctoring the truth

It is also important that with this analogy Lucretius implies that people who are not Epicureans are sick. Epicurus can become a doctor or a saviour for us all (and he is referred to in exactly these terms at the beginning of book six). So Epicureanism is indeed a kind of drug. Indeed, Epicurus himself in his own writings used a medicinal metaphor, dubbing the most basic essentials of his philosophy the 'four-fold remedy.' This 'remedy' offered four fundamental teachings, which, if internalised, allow us to lead a happy life by curing the major ills to which people are prone. These teachings are:

*God should not concern to us.
 Death is not to be feared.
 What is good is easy to obtain.
 What is bad is easily avoided.*

Looking at these four principles, we can understand why Lucretius thought that most people recoiled at the first sight of Epicurean philosophy. In particular, the first and second principles were thought of in antiquity as potentially dangerous statements. Both of these were directly linked to Epicurus' theory of the physical world, which is rightly famous, and to which Lucretius dedicates much of his poem. For an Epicurean, the world is made of atoms whirling around in empty space (or 'void'). Sometimes these atoms come together to form the objects around us. All natural phenomena, from how a tree grows to how mirrors work, can be explained with this basic, fundamental insight.

From this physical theory, two important conclusions follow. First, there is no need to think that there are gods who create or regulate the world. The world's very existence and all the workings in it can be sufficiently explained by atomic theory. In that case, Epicurus claims, we can stop being worried about gods becoming angry if we act or fail to act in particular ways; they simply have no interest in the world or in us. This is supposed to be a relief, since one of the reasons for mankind's sickness is the fear of divine retribution that impedes our pursuit of pleasure – which the Epicureans think is the true goal of life, the good which the third thesis assures us is easily secured. Second, we too are made of atoms and when we die the atoms disperse and we are no longer. There are no such things as 'immortal souls,' and so there is no afterlife. All that superstitious talk of judgement after death is nonsense, and (worse) encumbers us with unnecessary and distracting fears.

Although Epicureans think these conclusions are positive steps towards living a happy life, and Lucretius devotes a lot of his poem to persuading us that they are true, they are certainly not the kind of things his general readership would find immediately palatable. To think that the gods pay no attention to us, and to encourage the rejection of traditional religion is a dangerous idea. Epicureanism advocates a radical reassessment of the shared beliefs and ritual practices that underpin society, and so might conceivably be held to threaten the very basis of society itself. As a result, it is often treated with extreme suspicion by its opponents.

However, as we have seen, Lucretius is aware of this difficulty and adjusts the presentation of his message accordingly. Many people, he realises, will mistrust Epicurus' teachings; but that is only because they are still subject to the unfounded beliefs which are themselves the barriers to them living a happy Epicurean life. All the more reason, therefore, for Lucretius to set about his task of reforming people's views and curing our sickness by using poetic forms, metaphors, images and so on, with which his audience would be familiar. They need to be lulled gradually into an acceptance of Epicureanism and the good life it provides. Trust me, Lucretius tells his readers – I'm a doctor.

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For more on Lucretius try: <http://www.vroma.org/~abarker/lucretius.html>